

S.P.A.C.E. for Ash Wednesday

Wednesday 17th February 2021



Adam and Eve Titian c 1550 Museo del Prado, Madrid

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The fall

3 Now the snake was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God really say, “You must not eat from any tree in the garden?”’

² The woman said to the snake, ‘We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ but God did say, “You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.”’

⁴ ‘You will not certainly die,’ the snake said to the woman. ⁵ ‘For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’

⁶ When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

⁸ Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’

¹⁰ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’

¹¹ And he said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?’

¹² The man said, ‘The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.’

¹³ Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’

The woman said, ‘The snake deceived me, and I ate.’

Genesis 3:1-12

In Titian's painting the tempter is shown as a cherub-serpent rather than as snake. We see him lodged in the branches of a tree with his forked tail wrapped around the tree trunk. Eve stands, Adam sits, his arm outstretched towards his wife. The three characters form a tilted triangle, locked together in this enterprise. On its downward path an apple will pass from corner to corner as the tempter does his work. In his painting Titian depicts the moment when the apple passes from the tempter to the woman.

How do we respond to this very familiar passage? Do we dismiss the story of the Fall as a naïve fantasy about a talking snake - a story fit only for children? I prefer to see it as a wonderfully poetic representation of a several fundamental truths:

- God provided a wonderful world for mankind in which his needs could be met.
- He set limits to our actions and also...
- ... gave us the freedom to override them...
- ...but if we choose to do so there will be inevitable consequences.

It is also a fascinating insight into the mechanism of temptation.

The tempter first sows doubt: "*Did God really say....*"(v1). Eve responds but does so inaccurately – she actually goes beyond what they had been told in Genesis 2:17, adding the words "*...and you must not touch it*" to the instruction God had given them. Has she begun to forget, or chosen not to remember, exactly what God had said?

Having succeeded in undermining her certainty, the tempter moves on to contradict God's words. In v4 asserts: "*You will **not** certainly die*". Rather than just presenting her with a choice between his words and God's words, in v5 he adds a reason for disregarding God's: "*For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*" This not only cast doubt on God's motives but offers something which will interest Eve, that is God-like knowledge. This tipped the balance: the fruit looked and tasted good **and** offered wisdom. She ate the fruit.

After succumbing to temptation herself Eve offers the fruit to Adam. Eve had progressed from being the tempter's victim to becoming his agent. Now her husband also succumbed. The two had gained knowledge but lost innocence and fractured their relationship with God.

To dismiss the story of Adam and Eve as a fable about a talking snake, a taunt used by atheists to denigrate believers, is to miss the point and imprison it in a literal interpretation. It is far too important to be abused in this way. One author* has written that it has influenced the way we think about "*crime and punishment, moral responsibility, death, pain, work, leisure, companionship, marriage, gender, curiosity, sexuality, and our shared humanness*". It is a story rich in meaning and different aspects have resonated with believers at different times.

I think that its relevance today is as a story about the misuse of freewill, illustrating how mankind likes to exercise freewill but not take responsibility for doing so. Both Adam and Eve made a free choice in taking the fruit yet, when challenged, their defence was that were not acting freely, they were "made to do it". Each tried to blame someone else. Eve blamed the snake (v13). Adam went further; he blamed Eve but implicated God as well by referring to her as "*the woman **you** put here with me gave me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.*"(v12). The way Adam puts this suggests that he sees the real problem as the offer of the fruit rather than his choosing to accept and eat it.

*from "*The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*" by Stephen Greenblatt

Adam and Eve wanted knowledge but they couldn't handle it: they were unable or unwilling to accept the moral responsibility this brought with it.

We live in a world of ever-expanding scientific knowledge and rapid technological progress. In the West we place a high value on personal choice. All of this can be very positive and beneficial - but only if we accept that these benefits require us to exercise great moral responsibility as a society and as individuals. If we deny our personal responsibility we repeat the mistake made by Adam and Eve.

Lent is not the time to embark on a six-week guilt trip! That would be self-indulgent and unhelpful. However, from time to time we do need to take stock of where we are and what we could do better, genuinely repent of the things we have got wrong and as we do so draw strength and comfort from the great biblical teaching on forgiveness and restoration.

We will look at some of these over the next six weeks:

Wed 24 th February	Matthew 6:7-15	Forgive as God forgives
Wed 3 rd March	Matthew 5:21-26	Reconciliation
Wed 10 th March	Luke 15:11-32	Restoration
Wed 17 th March	John 7:53-8:11	No Condemnation
Wed 24 th March	Mark 11:20-26	Faith and Forgiveness
Wed 31 st March	Luke 23:32-43	Pardon

*The next S.P.A.C.E reflection will be posted on Wednesday February 24th
and there will be one every week in Lent*

A prayer for today, Ash Wednesday

Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made
and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:
create and make in us new and contrite hearts
that we, worthily lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

...and a traditional psalm and a modern hymn for prayerful reflection

Psalm 51

Forgive us when our deeds ignore

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.

² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.

⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived
me.

⁶ Yet you desired faithfulness even in the
womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.

¹⁴ Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O
God,
you who are God my Saviour,
and my tongue will sing of your
righteousness.

¹⁵ Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would
bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

¹⁷ My sacrifice, O God, is^[b] a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.

¹⁸ May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.

¹⁹ Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the
righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

1 Forgive us when our deeds ignore
your righteous rule of all the earth,
when our decisions harm the poor,
denying their eternal worth.

2 Forgive us when we turn aside
from what is honest, true and fair,
when dreams of pleasure, wealth and pride
supplant your clear commands to care.

3 Forgive us, Lord, our endless greed
for what was never truly ours,
when, driven more by want than need,
we harness this world's brutal powers.

4 Forgive us that we change the rules
by which the game of life is played,
and never learn to wield the tools
which could see joy and hope remade.

5 Forgive us, God! Our lives betray
our shallow, vague response to grace;
so help us walk your holy way,
to make your world a better place.

Martin E. Leckebusch (b. 1962)

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